{ See Note at end. }

UNITY

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FOR

FREEDOM, FELLOWSHIP AND CHARACTER IN RELIGION.

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MAN'S STEWARDSHIP ON THIS EARTH.

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A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not; but afterward he repented, and went.—Matthew xxi: 28-29.

"He repented;" to speak more exactly, he changed his mind; he thought better about it; and instead of passing the day in idleness he went to work. The vineyard in the Parable is this earth which God has given to the children of men that they may put it to the highest uses. He bids us go work in it, and it is one of the most encouraging signs of our religious times that many who have had no mind for such work are going into this vineyard and are becoming workers with God. It is a change which is giving to religion a human character and a home in the hearts and occupations of men that we have often looked for in vain, and a change which is making religion what it was once to prophets and evangelists—a blessed hope for this world as well as for worlds to come.

And it will be easier for us than it once was to understand that God calls upon us to work for Him to-day and on this earth; that in the plan and ordering of His Providence there is work which is properly ours, and which is done or left undone as we do it or fail to do it, work as distinctly ours as the task of the laborer who is sent into the vineyard is distinctly his, and done well or ill or not at all as he is faithful or faithless. Doubtless God might have made a world in which we should have been only lookers on, amusing ourselves perhaps, or it may be eagerly advancing some purely selfish objects, and in no way responsible for human fortunes; but He has not made such a world. The earth as well as the heavens is His; but the earth He has given to us and its supreme interests

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are very largely in our care. The vineyard is indeed His. We believe that He made our world and is the Master Worker in it and forever its Light and Life, that we can do nothing in it without Him, and that the obligation which we feel to labor is a Divine call. It is our deep and glad conviction that our world is worth working in, because it is God's world and therefore capable of improvement, capable of being completed, wonderfully rich in the most real wealth, yielding a harvest to our husbandry a hundred and a thousand fold, and seemingly inexhaustible in its resources; but all the same the power that works for us and with us steadily refuses to do our work, will not regard our pleading of His Omnipotence, is continually deaf to our prayers, and seems to say to us, no matter how dire the need—Everything with you, nothing without you: Son, go work to-day in my vineyard.

Man's stewardship on earth is as old as man's creation. Nothing can be plainer than this—that he was called into life to be a worker here with God, and that it has pleased God to make him indispensable to the world's success. What we call his volition, his moral freedom, his I will or I will not, counts for something as a condition in the order of events. It is a mysterious force which is akin to the Divine energy. It is an element which was unknown in the life of earth before man's coming, only feebly recognized and manifested in the days of his feebleness and ignorance, but increasing more and more as time went on, until now, as we look into the future of our race, we can scarcely assign for it any limits material or moral, whether we are opening up vast continents for art and industries and their results or multiplying the treasures of the mind and the heart. The world is, and more and more is to be, what we make it, as we study its divine order, as we are alive to recognize necessities, opportunities, promises, threatenings; as we accept the situation, and find it our plain duty to do the thing which needs to be done and ought to be done, to do it at once and with our might, relying upon God to help us, but not waiting in the vain hope that He will do our work for us. In the old religious times, which are fast changing, there was a great deal of praying, which it was thought might answer instead of working; but it did not answer. In our new times there has come in a notion that somehow the world will work itself right under some course of nature, some survival of the fittest, with which it is idle or worse for us to intermeddle, with our spasms of energy and fitful philanthropies, and this notion will prove to be vain. Work for it, saith God, and you shall have it. For all our praying He will not make our world what he means it to be unless we come up to His help against the mighty; and as to any order of nature working blindly for us, it is for us to study and laboriously conform ourselves and others to this order of nature, if we would make the times better. What man was meant to be as a power to shape and modify and finish the natural world, the surface of our planet, the rivers, the fields, the hills, the forests, is abundantly to be seen. It has unhappily been very manifest in neglects and abuses; the desolations which it has made in the earth, as, for example, in "the fairest and fruitfulest provinces of the old Roman empire, the wasted and solitary soils of Persia and the remoter East, lands flowing once with milk and honey, a territory more extended than that of all Europe, but now very largely withdrawn from human use, the sad results of ignoronce, of temporal and spiritual tyranny and cruelty." God chose to be helped there, and He was hindered. It did matter that man was found foolish and unworthy. And on the other hand, it has been often the other way. Wildernesses have been turned into gardens, seas changed into dry land, parched grounds refreshed with pools of water, mountains pierced or scaled, that men might have farms and homesteads and fair cities and noble civilizations, an earth

subdued with consummate art and giant industry. It is true, of course, that God lays upon us a necessity to work with Him, and does not entrust such great ends and expectations to our wilfulness alone, and yet it continually remains for us to answer the unceasing call into the vineyard with a flat refusal or an idle promise and profession, which is even worse. He leaves it for us to be alive or dead to our opportunity, material or moral, to feel or not to feel the necessity which is laid upon us, to be attentive or deaf to His voice, to find or not to find it a plain duty to make at least a little corner of our world somewhat brighter, cleaner, happier than when we came into it.

Now, as I said in the beginning, it is very encouraging to find how many men and women are waking up to be of the mind to work and to see how much God is expecting them to do for Him, and are beginning to create a healthy, hopeful, and most beneficent religion in their endeavors to carry on God's work, finding in it, amidst great diversities of opinion, a bond of union and an occasion for charity; more than a duty—yes, a privilege, as when one is summoned from a lowly place and work to a high office and an honorable fellowship, and called to come up higher because he can do better work. The number is and will be steadily increasing of those who will be ashamed merely to be lookers on or selfish speculators and plotters in a world where so many things are going wrong, and there will be many who, if they have said: The vineyard isn't mine, and let him to whom it belongs work in it, will come to be of a wiser and nobler mind as they take their places by the side of the Unseen and the Almighty God, and say in all lowliness and in all gladness with Jesus: My Father worketh hitherto and I work.

And it may help on this blessed change a little, if we will bear in mind that this call into the vineyard is for all ears. Child, not son, is another reading of our text, and we are all children of Him who has put His world into our charge. And so if you tell me I cannot go into any special religious or moral enterprise, which is what you mean, I suppose, by the vineyard, because I have my daily work to do and must go down town, let me say that the whole world may be to us God's vineyard, all sacred, though with different kinds of sanctity, and that the call upon by far the larger part of men and women is to aim and strive to make our every day work honest, helpful, honorable, beautiful, by putting a conscience into it; by making it what work in God's vineyard should be. It is of the very essence and property of our religion to bring out of all earthly things—

> "Ye faith and peace and mighty love
> That from ye Godhead flow—"

their divine worth and infinite meaning; to bring them into and under the divine order; to discover the secret of nobleness and purity in the workshop and the market place; to give us something better than a slippery and barely presentable integrity, and, in this age of gold, amidst the inevitable competitions of the business world, to save us from sharp cunning and unscrupulous greed. This is the kind of advanced Christianity our world needs—progress; not so much in explaining the gospel, or explaining it away, as in a minute, individual, personal application, and use of it. I do not see that Christianity has applied itself. I find no such applied Christianity in any sacred book. Our religion is a principle, a spirit, not a precise rule, and it is our daily work in the vineyard to make and mend and buy and sell and be just and merciful in obedience to this principle and this spirit. Our part may be very subordinate; we may be under authority and hardly able to break rank—mere office boys, if you will—but, as much as in us lies, it is ours to shape the day's course, and to give a body and form to the spirit of Christ which is in us. Go work to-day, and your obedience to that call shall be an originality quite distinct from obstinacy and eccentricity—a religion coming from God to-day, and as welcome to

men as the sweet sunlight, the new grass and the fragrant blossoms. So much for all men, everywhere and at all times and in all conditions. But in a world where so many things need to be redeemed and set right, you shall hardly be willing to decline some special field of service which shall be to you as God's vineyard. If you so much as allow yourself to think of the world's moral needs, you will be unable even in the multitude of business to decline one and another special effort to supply these needs. Perhaps the son who said that he would not work was recovered from that thought of selfishness simply by seeeing how much there was to be done in the vineyard. So there are many who are indifferent, selfish, idlers, simply because they are not really alive and know so little about the city they live in, the wastes to be cultivated, the harvests to be reaped. Bring forth the blind people that have eyes and the deaf people that have ears. There is the making of men in them, a living fountain of religious and moral enthusiasm if only they could be made to know and feel it, and they would be made to know it and feel it if only they could be tempted beyond their little round of work and play, and see the city or village they live in as one sees cities and villages beyond the ocean. I do not see how the pressing moral needs of modern society can be met in any good degree unless they are in some sort everybody's business, not left to a few leaders and professed philanthropists, a few ministers and Sunday School teachers, but a part of the kingship and priesthood of every earnest Christian and every true-hearted man and woman. How they crowd upon the opening vision of awakening man!—the harvest more and more plenteous, but the laborers fewer and fewer, if we look only to those who have seemed to be pillars in churches, those whose calling has been especially accounted sacred;—how clear and urgent the summons to the rank and file of the great Christian army, if it be indeed such an army in anything but the name, to do some good Christian work, to produce though it were but the infinitesimal fraction of genuine Christianity. The multitude of men and women still so deep in misery and want and vice, the home so often dark and cold, the political world with its strifes and its corruptions and its low ambitions, the merciless competitions of trade, the sensualities which we can scarcely regulate, much less stamp out, the millions pouring in upon our land to be taught and humanized and bound in peaceful and pure communities, the myriad interests of a religion which undertakes to do something more for men and women than to administer sacraments at the beginning and the end and at rare intervals in the round of an evil life—how all these necessities plead with us and become ours and compel us into the vineyard. Not one of us that is not needed there every day if we would have, as we fondly hope, a moral progress which shall answer in any measure to the ever new miracles of modern science, art and industry, and build the cities of Light which prophets have seen in their visions and which men shall call cities of our God.

The word "UNITY" in the title bears to the Committee who arrange the series a wide meaning, pointing more to the substance, than to the forms, of religious thought and faith; and in inviting contributions they have sought, not only through the whole range, but in both directions beyond the range, of those who bear the "Unitarian" name. The choice of subject is left to the writers; and *each writer is responsible for his own utterance alone, and for nothing else in the series.* "One of your best—a life-helping sermon, or a thought-sermon reaching the life," was the invitation sent out.